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ABSTRACT

While reading John Dewey's "Art as Experience" and Robert Pirsig's "Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance: An Inquiry into Values," a graduate student observed close affinities between what Dewey referred to as "experience" and Pirsig referred to as "quality." Both texts are concerned with cultivating the appreciation of aesthetic things. When the student found himself conspicuous in the Chicago Art Institute because of the amount of time he spent at particular exhibits, he became distressed with the manner in which most patrons moved through the museum with only superficial observations. It is his contention that to a great extent the institutions of formalized education fail to provide either the types of environments and interactions necessary for aesthetic experiences to develop, or to teach students how to cultivate such experiences both in and out of school. Their privileging of mimetic modes of instruction and the acquisition of disembodied "knowledge," as evidenced by the widespread use of standardized testing, is in many ways fundamentally at odds with genuinely attentive approaches to the world (Jackson, 1986; Oakes, 1985). An excerpt from Pirsig's book in which the narrator enjoins one of his students to do "some original and direct seeing" by concentrating on a single brick in an opera house illustrates the potential of this type of education. (Contains 10 references.) (TB)

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JOHN DEWEY AND ROBERT PIRSIG: AN INVITATION TO "FRESH SEEING"

About two years ago I read John Dewey's Art as Experience and Robert Pirsig's Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance: An Inquiry into Values concurrently - the former for a seminar at the University of Chicago, and the latter because of Pirsig's intriguing legacy at this same institution - and was struck by what I perceived to be fundamental similarities between the two books, both in philosophical content and prescriptions for securing "the good life." For as readers of these books must surely have discovered, Art as Experience is for the most part not about the "fine arts," nor is Pirsig's offering centrally about motorcycle maintenance. In the course of my reading - eventually to include Pirsig's second book, Lila: An Inquiry into Morals, and Dewey's Experience and Nature - I began to notice that what Dewey referred to as "experience" had close affinities with what Pirsig's narrator called "Quality." First, both are viewed as some type of immediate, primary reality of the world encountered as something suffered and enjoyed. Second, both can be conceptualized in terms of 'events' or 'histories.' Third, both function to impel or motivate change and adaptation by the living organism. Fourth, both serve as the crucible of meaning and value but are not ubiquitously a knowledge affair. And fifth, both defy traditional transcendent, foundationalist and subject-object metaphysics, and are instead

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broken-down - for avowed instrumental purposes alone - in terms of stability and flux (Dewey's favorite descriptors) or static and dynamic (Pirsig's eventual replacement for classic and romantic; Pirsig, 1991).

Though Pirsig's narrator, after offering a somewhat superficial reading of William James, would eventually admit that his philosophy has much in common with the general tenants of pragmatism, there are clearly some trenchant differences between the work of Dewey and Pirsig. I will, for present purposes, limit my discussion to those more genre oriented distinctions. First, there exists the obvious contrast in their chosen format of expression -including, with Pirsig, the need to be aware of the error of ascribing all of the beliefs, opinions and attitudes of the narrator of Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance and protagonist of Lila to those of the flesh and blood author. Second, their pretensions to philosophical rigor and clarity would appear to be quite dissimilar. And third, their audiences, while certainly overlapping, are clearly distinct in general composition. In this paper I will disclose the way in which aspects of the writings of Dewey and Pirsig attendant to these differences can actually be advantageous for those readers familiar with the work of both authors. More specifically, for the way in which they might help to provide us with a richly contextualized way of relating Dewey's aesthetics to "the good life," and, hence, to education.

Dewey and Pirsig's narrator contend alike that in cultivating an attitude of attentiveness or care towards our surroundings we can bring about the liberation and expansion of the meanings of "experience" or "Quality" the world offers. In so doing, they argue,

our interactions with these surroundings will become imbued with a sense of unity or fulfillment, rather than transiency or inchoateness. We will then begin to feel more vitally connected to others and our environment, and through this, for example, be able to turn alien causes and effects into more friendly conditions and consequences. Ultimately, as the immediate and mediate become interwoven into the fabric of experience, we can bring about what Dewey calls "aesthetic experience" or Pirsig's narrator, "high-Quality" experience. But these vital constituents of "the good life" are only made possible by the fact that our surroundings are marked by change and flux, or what Pirsig's narrator calls "dynamic Quality," because, as Dewey tells us, "the moment of passage from disturbance into harmony is that of intensest life." (Dewey, 1980/1934, p.17). For this reason we must not be discouraged that the "quest for certainty" remains a mirage, but should take advantage of the opportunities for personal growth, expansion of meaning, expressivity, and experienced satisfaction such a world affords. In short, we should pursue what Pirsig's narrator calls "fresh seeing."

In Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance, for example, one can find several passages like the following describing "high-Quality" experience:

> [To say that] skilled mechanics and machinists of a certain sort..are not artists is to misunderstand the nature of art. They have patience, care and attentiveness to what they're doing, but more than this - there's a kind of inner peace of mind that isn't contrived but results

> from a kind of harmony with the work in which there's no leader and no follower. The material and the craftsman's thoughts change together in a progression of smooth, even changes until his mind is at rest at the exact instant the material is right. (Pirsig, 1974, p.266)

There are quite a few ideas expressed in this quotation that parallel Dewey's characterization of aesthetic experience. These include: (1) the contention that in "high-Quality" experiences subject and object exist in a continual transactional, rhythmic process of doing and undergoing involving both the body and the mind, the emotions and the intellect, (2) that such experiences allow us to identify a discernible beginning, middle, and ending as in narratives or drama, (3) that ends-in-view and "fresh-seeing" make possible intelligent and sympathetic creative interaction and consummation as opposed to fixed means and submission to dogmatic convention, (4) (through extrapolation) that coming-to-know something - the transformation of an indeterminate situation into a determinate one instrumental to the aesthetic - changes the object of knowledge, (5) that we can refer to these experiences as having an aesthetic, noncognitive qualitative immediacy about them, and (6) that "art" and "the aesthetic" need to be shaken from their lofty pedestal and democratized; made theoretically available to everyone. And curiously enough, in <u>Art as Experience</u> Dewey would himself proclaim that:

> The intelligent mechanic engaged in his job, interested in doing well and finding satisfaction in his handiwork,

> caring for his materials and tools with genuine affection, is artistically engaged. The difference between such a worker and the inept and careless bungler is as great in the shop as it is in the studio. (Dewey, 1980/1934, p.5)

But even though the aesthetic qualities of experience can, to some degree, arise spontaneously, the artistic engagement that gives humans the ability to arrange for, maintain and enhance the prospects for aesthetic experiences most certainly does not occur automatically, even in art museums.

Doing some part-time teaching at The School of the Art Institute of Chicago has afforded me the opportunity to spend several hours enjoying the wonderful collections of the Art Institute, as well as observing its patrons. Having read Dewey and Pirsig I ventured to cultivate aesthetic experiences by being attentive to the paintings, sculpture and other art objects in front of which I found myself, in the manner Dewey and Pirsig's narrator describe. I felt the benefits undeniable, as new and ever richer meanings and aesthetic qualities became manifest in my experiences. At the same time, however, I was distressed to note that the vast majority of my fellow visitors flitted from here to there, stopping briefly in front of every object, if at all, spending no more than five minutes in each gallery. Meanwhile, my own desire to invest between five to twenty minutes "working" with each object drew suspicious glances from the museum guards, as if I must certainly be considering thievery; perhaps "casing the joint."

I use the term 'working' to describe what I was doing because, as Dewey says, an art object or product is to be distinguished from an

art work in that the former is a physical object - or some other type of "text" - that is a condition for aesthetic experience, while the latter is what the object does with and in experience (Dewey 1980/1934). Dewey also avers that working in experience involves more than mere recognition; it demands perception. To use perception is to discriminate, to scrutinize, and if perception is to be aesthetic, it is to attain fulfillment in the process of perception. It can also yield "fresh seeing." That is, it stretches our expectations, opening us to the unexpected, the novel, allowing us to see things in a new way.

Many of my fellow visitors, it seemed, were not working in this manner. Their experiences of the art objects terminated with recognition; with "that reminds me of aunt Mildred's house," "he must have made a mistake, that woman's head is out of proportion with the rest of her," or, often rather haughtily, with "that's a Van Gogh and that's a Seurat," as they sped through the galleries. It appeared as though they were driven by some strangely alien need to see all the objects they knew to be famous, rather than "really experiencing" anything. This was not to my mind necessarily because of any lack of intelligence or knowledge of art, or that I wish to infer that these experiences were completely meaningless or unimportant. What distressed me was that many of them seemed to be missing what real perception, what working in experience, can bring; the novelty, qualitative immediacy and fulfillment of the aesthetic. But this flabbiness of mind or seeming inability to work in experience, and concomitant dismissal of the aesthetic, is not only existent in art museums, but in the way we often approach and deal with the everyday, and, unfortunately, education and learning.

It is my contention that to a great extent the institutions of formalized education fail to provide either the types of environments and interactions necessary for aesthetic experiences to develop, or to teach students how to cultivate such experiences both in and out of school. Their privileging of mimetic modes of instruction and the acquisition of disembodied "knowledge," as evinced by the continuing widespread use of standardized testing, is in many ways fundamentally at odds with genuinely attentive approaches to our world (Jackson, 1986; Oakes, 1985). For example, knowledge is not presented as a tool to be constantly refined, but as a fixed, static body of truths, eschewing the dynamic relation between knower and known (Biesta, 1994; McLaren, 1994; Delandshere and Petrosky, 1994; Garrison, 1994), and the role knowledge-as-relation plays in the cultivation of aesthetic experience. Working with subject matter is artificially terminated at the point of mere recognition as students are hurried through the museum of knowledge, allowed only the briefest glimpse at what the achievements of the past have to offer to present experience. Indeed, the elements of the mimetic tradition decried by Dewey in Democracy and Education, and Pirsig in the much more contemporary Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance, are still very much in evidence today (Dewey, 1966/1916, pp.334-335; Pirsig, 1974, p.156, pp.171-172).

By bringing Dewey and Pirsig together on these issues we are provided with a deep theoretical and philosophical understanding of education and aesthetic experience, and an appreciation of the complexity and contingency of experience and sense-making through the "thick description," attention to particulars and expressive

metaphor found in literature. Including, an appreciation of the need to be attentive to both things and people. In short, with Pirsig we are shown - so that we might see - what cannot be adequately said; we are shown what it's like to work to be attentive through our own efforts (as readers), as well as through those of a narrator and characters we get to know and sympathize with. While Pirsig's books are capable of providing aesthetic fulfillment for the alert and perceptive reader, they also, through a species of "fresh seeing," allow the reader to witness the consequences of the attitudes and struggles of those "others" we encounter therein. With this in mind, then, I will give a Deweyan reading to a brief section of Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance that I believe to be both very artistically insightful and poignantly critical of many current ways of thinking about education.

During the attempt to recover his own past, Pirsig's narrator reminisces about his struggles as a teacher of rhetoric in trying to get his students to become "high-Quality" writers. That is, in getting them to say new and interesting things through their ability to see the world as unique individuals. He relates the story of one specific student with "thick-lensed glasses" who, as the result of previous instruction on writing, is now unable to visualize a writing assignment in any other way than the standard "five-hundred-word essay about the United States." Though she worked very hard and narrowed her focus to Bozeman, Montana - the locale of her school - she just could not think of anything to say, and felt herself a failure. It would seem, the narrator tells us, that she has been trained not to see. Or, perhaps, to see only through the lens of dogmatic convention. After much hair pulling and several

more failures, the narrator finally asks her to narrow her focus even further, to a single brick in the Opera House. Something clicked. The next class period she turned in her essay, and related the "high-Quality" experience she had had during its composition (Pirsig, 1974, pp.170-171). What made this possible?

Well...to get her to think for herself instead of repeating what she had already heard, she had to be put in the position "to do some original and direct seeing," to use imagination, perception and work in experience, as Dewey might put it (Pirsig, 1974, p.171). Since we are given no details about her paper (and one would suspect on purpose), we can imagine her, in Deweyan fashion, putting the past to work in present experience by showing how this brick expresses durability, human endeavor and accomplishment. She could have begun by relating the story of the creation of the brick from local materials by a company belonging to the fourth generation of a founding family of Bozeman. Then, perhaps, of the energetic citizens who worked without pay to raise the funds needed for the construction of the new Opera House, of the opening day celebration, and of all of the wonderful singers and performances that have provided enjoyment for so many people for so many years. In short, the whole history of Bozeman may have been told through the history of this single brick, and the role the Opera House has played in the lives of the citizens of Bozeman throughout the years. And I would gather that the experience of developing such a narrative might not only have taught this student about the history of Bozeman and about writing composition, but also about how to attend to and reconstruct her experiences of the world around her (what Wittgenstein might call "knowing how to go on"). The world as encountered through

museums and art objects, or even, for example, as encountered through something as quotidian, and seemingly inexpressive and insubstantial as a brick. Such a world offers endless possibilities for personal growth, expansion of meaning, expressivity, and aesthetic experience.

There are a myriad of ways in which education can affect the way we experience the world and, indeed, our quality of life, that are valuable in that they aid in our ability to cultivate aesthetic or "high-Quality" experiences. To do this, however, we must deepen our understanding of educational activities beyond what can purportedly be comprehended in terms of measurable outcomes. The expressiveness and qualitative immediacy of experience need to be addressed as well if, as Dewey urges, we are to recover "the continuity of esthetic experience with the normal processes of living" and, one might add, learning (Dewey, 1980/1934, p.10). Therefore, we, as scholars and educators, by thinking about its purposes and effects more broadly, need to become more aware of education in terms of the way in which it can help to teach students how to work in and be attentive to the art of experience. As Pirsig has helped to show us, providing environments that encourage or demand "fresh seeing" might prove a fruitful beginning.

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